

Results of the Pickleball Player Survey

December 2013

As part of an ongoing effort to help grow the sport of pickleball, we conducted a survey earlier this year to improve understanding of athletes' motivation for playing. The findings are intended to help those who organize pickleball-related activities to enhance pickleballers' playing experience, increase current players' participation levels, and attract new players to this great sport. Pickleball organizers and activities include clubs, sport centers, associations, coaches, clinics, leagues, events and tournaments.

Hundreds of pickleball players from the US, Canada and Ireland participated in the survey. Their responses provide useful insight into the following question: What Motivates People to Play Pickleball? This document highlights results from the survey.

We appreciate the participation of all of you who took part in the survey and hope that you find the results interesting and useful.

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1. Survey Participants

A total of 594 respondents completed the survey. The average age was 66. The large majority of respondents (87%) live in the US, while 8% were from Ireland and 5% from Canada. In North America, respondents were evenly split between females and males. In Ireland nearly 80% of the respondents were female.

All of the players in Ireland were new to the sport, having played for less than 3 months at the time of the survey¹. Respondents in North America had much more playing experience with over 70% having played two or more years. Over half of the North American respondents (58%) knew their player rating², with 90% of them ranging from 3.0 to 4.5.

2. Commitment to Pickleball Participation

Respondents expressed a high level of commitment to continue playing pickleball, with close to 80% claiming that it would be “hard” or “very hard” to stop playing the sport. In fact, over 90% of all respondents report that they are either “determined” or “very determined” to continue playing.

The respondents’ high level of commitment to pickleball participation supports the general belief that pickleball players become very attached to the sport. It is common to hear players describe pickleball as “addicting” and to claim that they “love” the sport. The sections below provide a summary of the key factors affecting athletes’ commitment to pickleball.

3. Factors that Motivate Pickleball Participation

Participants were asked to express the three to five most important reasons they play pickleball, from most to least important. More than 2,000 motivation factors were given.

The Most Important Reason: When we look exclusively at what respondents expressed as “the most important reason” for playing, the most frequently mentioned categories for both males and females are:

- 1st: Health-related: *exercise, fit, active, health, physical, workout, shape, body, cardio*
- 2nd: Fun-related: *fun, enjoy, doing something I’m good at, travel*
- 3rd: Competition-related: *competition/compete/competitive, challenge, win*
- 4th: Social-related: *social, friend(ship), people, meet, spouse, partner, family, team, camaraderie, fellowship*
- 5th: Development-related: *learn, improve, achieve, mental, mind, brain, alertness*

All of the Reasons for Playing: When we analyze “all” of the reasons for playing expressed by males and females, “social-” and “health-related” factors were tied as the most frequently mentioned categories, followed in order by “fun-”, “competition-” and “development-related”.

¹ We introduced pickleball to Ireland in September of 2012 by organizing a pickleball demonstration at the University College Dublin. David Scally subsequently set up a 6-week pickleball introduction program, after which the participants were asked to take part in this survey. These players had never heard of pickleball prior to the program.

² Player ratings are used to group players by ability levels so that they can compete in tournaments or leagues with other players of similar ability. Ratings range from 1.0 for beginners to 5.0 for the most advanced players.

4. Males versus Females

Males and females expressed very similar motivations for playing. For both males and females, 33% of all of the “reasons for playing” mentioned (over 1,000 by each gender) were “social-related” and an additional 33% were “health-related”.

The importance of other motivators varies slightly. First, “fun-related” factors were mentioned more frequently by females (23% of all of the reasons mentioned by women) than by males (19%). Second, “competition-related” factors were mentioned more frequently by males (14% of all reasons mentioned by men) than by females (10%).

5. Personal Development

Although development-related factors were mentioned less than other categories, most respondents indicate that personal development aspects are “important” or “very important” factors in their motivation for playing. Such factors include:

- Seeing personal improvement in performance,
- Working on the skills and techniques of the sport,
- Learning from others, and
- Setting and reaching performance goals.

6. The Thrill of Competing

Although competitive-related factors were not the most frequently mentioned motivators, nearly all of the respondents claim that they are “determined competitors”, “enjoy trying to beat someone/a team they’ve never beaten before”, and “try their hardest to win”. In addition, over two-thirds of all respondents claim that “winning is important to them”. Regarding the most motivating type of opponent to face, 90% of respondents prefer to compete against others “at their own level” most of the time, while 70% enjoy playing against “the best” at least some of the time to test their skills. Ten percent prefer to play against “the best” all of the time.

7. Encouragement from Others

When asked about support from significant others, 90% of all respondents indicate that they receive some type of positive feedback or encouragement to play pickleball from family or friends.

8. Factors that Limit or Prohibit Pickleball Participation

Participants expressed close to 1,000 *prohibiting* factors, which is less than half the number of *motivating* factors mentioned. In fact, several respondents commented that “there are no barriers” to playing pickleball or simply left this question blank.

For both males and females, the most frequently mentioned barrier categories were:

- 1st: Access/facility-related: *court availability, weather (heat, rain, wind), distance, access*
- 2nd: Health-related: *health, illness, injury, ailment, physical, joints, arthritis, pain, age*
- 3rd: Other commitments-related: *time, work, family, busy*
- 4th: Partner/opponent/skill-level-related: *finding right level/opponent/partner*
- 5th: Cost/expense-related

9. “Skill Level” and “Experience Level”

Commitment to continue playing is consistently high across all “skill levels”; among the respondents who know their player rating, 98% indicate that they are determined to continue participating.

Commitment is also high across all “experience levels” (ranging from less than 3 months to more than 5 years) with 97% indicating that they are determined to continue playing. Determination is higher among the more experienced players, although beginning players express a surprisingly high level of commitment to the sport: 77% of those with less than 3 months of experience indicate that they are determined to continue playing, climbing quickly to 92% for those with 3 to 6 months of experience³.

Several of the factors leading to high commitment were important to players at all skill levels, with “health-related” factors identified as the most important. Other motivators that were important across all skill levels include “development-related” (learning, improving one’s technique) and “competence-related” (doing something they are good at). In addition, players at all skill levels stated that they enjoy the overall “challenge” that pickleball offers.

Other important motivation factors varied slightly depending on respondents’ skill level. For one, “social-related” factors such as meeting people were higher for the lower-skilled players. On the other hand, “competitive-related” factors such as winning or playing against the best were more important to the higher-skilled players. Higher-skilled players are also more motivated to “demonstrate their playing ability” and “be recognized for their accomplishments”.

Motivation factors for players with different experience levels are very similar to the results described above for players with different skill levels: “health-related” factors rank as the top motivator for all experience levels; “development-” and “competence-related” factors are viewed as important by players at all experience levels; “social-related” factors are more important for less experienced players; “competitive-related” factors are more important for more experienced players; finally, the overall “challenge” that pickleball offers is equally motivating to players at all experience levels.

10. Implications of the Survey Results

The survey results will likely validate the approaches many pickleball organizers are already using to develop the sport. It is hoped that the suggestions below will help to fine-tune promotional efforts as well as generate new approaches to growing pickleball and enhancing the overall playing experience.

- **Attracting New Players:**
 - Communicate the social and health benefits involved with playing pickleball.
 - Offer demonstration classes to introduce newcomers to the game.
 - Encourage drop-in hours where new players are welcomed to come and learn from more experienced players.
 - Provide new players with regular opportunities to play against others with similar skill levels.

³ All of the respondents from Ireland had less than 3 months playing experience. For respondents from North America, 2% had less than 3 months and 8% had less than 6 months playing experience.

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- Make it easy for people to get to know one another by creating opportunities for social interaction before, during and after introductory sessions.
- Stimulating/Retaining Experienced Players:
 - Continue to offer training for different skill levels, including the most advanced levels.
 - Offer to evaluate and provide player ratings to those who have not yet obtained a player rating.
 - Offer to provide a new evaluation for players who feel they have improved since their last rating.
 - Encourage players to get their player rating despite it not being a “perfect” system. It provides an effective way to encourage players to focus on their personal development and goal setting, in addition to increasing their playing satisfaction by allowing them to play against others at their own level.
 - Encourage players to participate in tournaments.
 - Organize refereed competitive events/tournaments for players to test their skills against others and experience the thrill of competition.
 - Recognize top performers with awards, webpage, press, etc.
- New and Experienced Players
 - Develop and communicate safety guidelines clearly and often to avoid common accidents or injuries.
 - Encourage warm-up exercises every time people play.
 - Promote the unique mental and physical benefits that pickleball offers: safe exercise with a challenge of improving one’s ability (personal), work as part of a team (social), while facing opponents (competitive).
 - Invite health experts to deliver presentations about fitness, training, warming-up, endurance, avoiding typical injuries at certain ages, etc.
 - Reach out to families of players, as significant others play an important role in encouraging pickleballers to play.
 - Organize “family and friends” pickleball days to involve significant others and promote “co-ed” and “inter-generational” play.
 - Invite pickleball instructors and high-level players to provide clinics, classes and training. People at all levels enjoy learning from others and working on their techniques.
 - Create showcase matches, invite high-level players for demonstrations, show the elite side of the sport.
 - Inform players about tournaments or pickleball-related travel.
 - Have purely social playing events where the focus is playing for fun and meeting new people rather than winning. Rotate players to ensure they play with a different person every game throughout the event.
 - Provide opportunities for players to find and meet potential playing partners.
- Organizing Play
 - Offer play for different levels, perhaps separating courts by “recreational play” and “competitive play”, thus allowing players to choose to “play against their own level” or “play against the best”.
 - New clubs or playing locations with a small number of players could organize mixers/competitions with other clubs or locations so that players can experience facing opponents of similar skill levels. This can reduce the frustration of having to play against opponents that do not match one’s skill level at locations where the sport has just been introduced.

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- Arrange competitions or tournaments with enough frequency to allow players to face new players, test their skills, and enjoy the thrill of competition associated with the sport.
- Encourage and support players who are traveling long distances to play to establish places to play closer to their homes.
- Offer play at different hours/days to ensure “busier” players can participate as well.
- Consider providing access to indoor facilities during seasons with less welcoming weather, or vice versa if your facilities are primarily indoors.

Ongoing Research

More conclusions from the survey results will be presented in a research paper that is in process. Anyone interested in receiving a copy of the future research paper may contact Michael Hess at mhess@cunef.edu. Please do not publish these results without contacting the authors first.